Edna Williams

Lived:
March 12, 1887 - July 4, 1965

Worked as:
distribution company founder, distribution company owner, distributor, songwriter

Worked In:
United States

by **Donald Crafton**

The career of Edna Williams, an unrecognized pioneer in the field of international film distribution, demonstrates not only the importance, but also the pervasiveness, of many individuals who worked behind the scenes performing the all-important work of connecting moving picture producers and their audiences. One searches film history texts in vain, however, for any mention of Williams, despite having been dubbed in 1921 by *Photoplay* (albeit incorrectly) "The Film's First Woman Executive" (94). In 1918, at least one trade journal, *Exhibitors Herald*, singled out Williams as a sign that distribution might be an emerging domain suitable for women:

> Feminism is advancing in the motion picture industry. Feminine stars long have been one of the pillars of the industry. Feminine exhibitors abound the country over, but women who head their own producing or distributing concerns, or who devote their energies to the selling side of the business are still attracting considerable attention. ("Edna Williams, Film Executive" 28)

Having achieved a prominent position in the virtually all-male world of the motion picture front office in the late 1910s through the 1920s, Williams and other "feminine" exhibitors and distributors nevertheless have all but disappeared from the annals of film.

Very little is known about Williams. We can piece together her career from some scant references in the trade press, augmented by research in online genealogical resources like Ancestry.com. Her parents were Charles Edward Williams and Caroline M. "Carrie" (Sanders) Williams. They were married in 1885, and their first child, Edna I. Williams, was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on March 12, 1887. According to the United States Census of 1900, Edna had two siblings at the time: Mazie and Sarah. Williams' middle initial "I" appears uniquely in Edna Williams' Certificate of Death and the "California Death Index, 1940-1997."

When Williams was a teenager, she moved to California, where "she and her mother, from whom Miss Williams inherited her uncommon ability, controlled in Los Angeles some of the biggest and best apartment hotels in the city" ("Edna Williams, Film Executive" 28). After gaining some success as an amateur songwriter in Los Angeles, Williams, at twenty years of age, set out to join her mother, who had moved to New York. There, she found "the music publishers…very different human beings from what she had imagined. She found them crafty and designing" (McNamara 1922, 26). While working as a book peddler and cashier, she was also tendering her songs, one of which, "If the Wind Had Only Blown the Other Way," was picked up by the Jos. W. Stern publishing company, one of the leading Tin Pan Alley sheet-music producers located in the rapidly expanding entertainment district around the newly-named Times Square. It was a genuine hit and resulted in royalties of $1,500 and an offer to join the Stern staff, probably in 1910, when she was twenty-two or twenty-three years old. There, she ground out tunes, focusing on a certain genre: "songs which were not exactly vulgar, but with just that little French tang of naughtiness which Americans do not know how to simulate" (McNamara 27). Her biggest hit was in 1913 with "Over the Great Divide." "You ought to know that it's a hit," she told a reporter for the *New York Clipper*, showing a penchant for hyperbole. "Why, I am offered $10,000 for my royalty interest in the song, that's going some, isn't it? But take it from me, they couldn't buy it for twice that sum" (Edwards 1913, 12).

The music business was converging with motion pictures. Williams' entrée into cinema appears to have been the result of a visit to Stern by Sir Ben Fuller, an Australian theater magnate. After hosting his tour, he offered her the position of his buying agent. As Sue McNamara reported later in 1922:

> Of course she accepted. This was at the time when only a few small and struggling concerns were in the business—Carl Laemmle, David Horsley, Pat Powers, Addie Kissell being among the first. But Miss Williams, with her far-sighted intelligence saw that this was to develop into one of the world's biggest industries, and, with more and more companies springing up and more and more people demanding to see the pictures, the principal need would be good stories. Thus she reasoned. (27)

Williams' transition into film continued in 1914 when she joined a nearby import-export company called the National Movement Motion Picture Bureau, Inc. Her publicity portrait shows a self-confident woman of twenty-seven years, dressed in a vested tweed suit, with a carnation and diamond stick-pin. A later passport application provided this legal description: Height, 5 feet 6 inches; high forehead, blue eyes, straight nose, medium mouth, round chin, blonde hair, fair complexion, and round face. The 1914 press release in *Motion Picture News* provided the surprising information that "Miss Williams has long been connected with the theatrical world, and is well known to the heads of many film houses on account of her heavy purchases for Australia and South America" ("Alec Lorimore Active" 48). Although film was taking up more of her time, she did keep her "day job" as a song plugger until 1916, when it was announced in the *New York Clipper* that she had severed her connection with the Jos. Stern company ("Melody Lane" 24). Soon after, *Motion Picture News* reported that she took a position as "foreign

representation" for another upstart film dealer, Frank J. Seng ("Seng Sells 'Parentage'" 1917, 2574).

Williams' career took a decisive turn when she began an association with a livewire newcomer to the film business, Frank G. Hall, based in Newark, New Jersey. According to *The Billboard*, in May 1917, she negotiated an important deal on his behalf, selling the Australian rights to *The Bar Sinister* (1917), a sensational feature about miscegenation, written and directed by Edgar Lewis (82). Hall was so pleased that he put her in charge of foreign sales for his company, U.S. Exhibitors Booking Corporation ("New York Will Be" 1917, 246; "Active Foreign Market" 1917, 155).

In this tumultuous period for the film industry, World War I had rejiggered traditional international film markets and producers' methods for reaching them. While major Hollywood companies, notably Universal, Famous Players-Lasky, and Fox, had their own subsidiary agencies and exchanges abroad, smaller studios and independent producers relied on foreign agents that essentially expanded the old "state rights" model to the entire world. The central clearing house was London (Vasey 1997, 15). Williams' customer, Australasian Films Ltd., for example, controlled Union Theatres, a chain of seventy houses in Australia and New Zealand (Thompson 1985, 91-82). The deals were for a one-time payment that would allow the buyer to exhibit or sub-distribute the title in the specific territory.

Williams' prescient observations about the significance of postwar distribution for American filmmakers have been validated by contemporary historians:

> The close of the [First World War] will see New York in the position formerly held by London as the central distributing plant. Many buyers are now doing business through New York who bought only in London before the war, and it is natural that, their connections once made, they will continue to do so.…The limited amount of production now done outside of America has made our pictures more popular than ever, and it is doubtful whether other countries will be able to compete with us for a long time to come. The only possible exception in this regard is Italy, where the public has been educated to accept the artistic and the beautiful in pictures irrespective of the story value, and still prefer extra footage with long drawn out scenes showing attractive backgrounds in place of our closely cut scenes full of action. ("New York Will Be" 246; "Active Foreign Market" 155)

Hall was not a sound businessman and his house of cards (that included movie houses and a film studio) soon would collapse. But Williams, either fortunately or astutely, made her exit in November 1918 and joined the organization of one of Hall's primary business partners. The Robertson-Cole company contacted Williams while trying to fulfill a client's request for the rights to a certain American film. She obliged and suggested that the company ought to open an American branch. The executive, Rufus S. Cole, agreed and hired her to run it (McNamara 27). Robertson-Cole was a British-based banking house. Recently, their import-export trade had

diversified into film, moving quickly from financing, to distributing, and now producing. They hired Williams just as the Film Division was expanding into new offices at 1600 Broadway (the "Mecca Building," home to several film corporations). Again, her new employers crowed in *Motion Picture News* about landing her services: "Miss Edna Williams, special representative of the Robertson-Cole Company of New York and London, which has acquired the foreign distributing rights to the productions released by the U.S. Exhibitors' Booking Corporation, has encountered no difficulty in disposing of the subjects thus far put on the market by the booking concern…Rights to the new Thomas H. Ince spectacle, *The Zeppelin's Last Raid*, have been sold for Japan, China, India, Burma, Ceylon, Dutch East Indies, Philippines and Hawaiian Island." Asked about future prospects, "Miss Williams said: 'Although conditions in the foreign field have not been of the best, we have been quick in disposing of the U.S. productions. I have found that foreign purchasers are willing to pay big prices for the right kind of subjects even in view of slack conditions and take a chance on deriving a profit on the investment. It is the play in which they are most interested. Foreign picture devotees have become quite as discriminating as the film fans of America'" ("Big Sales in Orient" 1917, 4573).

Although Robertson-Cole no doubt planted it for publicity, *Exhibitors Herald* published an unusually in-depth article called "Edna Williams, Film Executive" in 1918:

> One of the handful of successful women who are heading their own organizations is Miss Edna Williams, general manager of the Robertson-Cole Company's film department, famous explorers of New York and London, to which concern has been allotted the foreign territorial rights to all productions distributed by the U.S. Exhibitors Booking Corporation.
>
> In her office in the Times Building this energetic young woman—she is yet this side of the thirty-year milestone [*sic*]—directs virtually single-handed one of the largest enterprises now operating in the foreign film field. She is in touch with exhibitors in all parts of the globe…
>
> In less than three months this enterprising young woman has established by her own efforts a distributing organization that has become an important factor in the foreign field. It is her intention to distribute only special productions—subjects above the accepted program standard of merit—as she believes there is a larger demand for that kind of pictures [*sic*] in the foreign field than for program material…
>
> "I have spent the past year in studying the foreign film market from New York very closely," declared Miss Williams. "I have realized that there are many obstacles to be overcome before one can really dispose of pictures in foreign countries as they should be marketed.
>
> "Unfortunately a great deal of foreign sales must be made by cable through the various brokers in New York City and this way the purchaser never knows until after his money is spent and the film is sent to him for inspection, just what he has received for

> his money. It is virtually a lottery. Naturally, many sales have been a distinct loss to the purchasers in the different territories and it has been my idea that a company with branch offices in the principal foreign cities would overcome all these disadvantages. Hence, the organization of the [Robertson-Cole] company through which the U.S. productions are distributed in the foreign markets." (28)

They soon added Latin American territories to her sales inventory ("Robertson-Cole" 1918, 555; "Recent Sales" 1918, 572). Ethel Smith, a stenographer fresh from Smith College, was hired on as her assistant ("Ethel Smith" 1938, 4). (Smith would go on to take over many of Williams' duties when Robertson-Cole evolved into F.B.O. and then RKO.)

Once again, the trade press reporters went to Williams for intelligent commentary on current affairs. Regarding a new tariff bill, she responded authoritatively in *Motion Picture News* in September 1921: "We are opposed to the proposed tariff. Twenty per cent of the revenue from our gross business has to come from foreign countries. A 30 per cent ad valorem duty will exclude from the United States practically all foreign pictures. Retaliatory tariffs will exclude American pictures from practically all the foreign countries. The loss of the foreign market will cost American producers and distributors millions of dollars annually. England, South America, Australia and Mexico depend upon America for about 80 per cent of their films, whereas the foreign films in America are hardly two per cent of our total consumption and probably never will be over five per cent" ("Sees Salaries Reduced" 1192).

Williams' reputation continued to grow. However, often it was based as much on the novelty of being a female executive in a man's world as on her accomplishments in selling films, as in the 1921 *Photoplay* profile cited above (94). An accompanying portrait of Williams caught her in a pensive pose.

Robertson-Cole was financially unstable and undergoing reorganization. The co-founder Cole was let go in 1922, and the New York-based financing and distribution wing of the company was merged into an entity to be called Film Booking Offices of America (F.B.O.). In an envoi for the executive, *Variety* recognized Williams' role in the success of the enterprise: "It was Edna Williams who is accredited with first visualizing for Cole the El Dorado an American producing plant offered" ("Inside Stuff on Pictures" 1922, 35).

Apparently swayed by Williams' argument for more of their foreign branches to augment the London exchange, the new F.B.O. management sent her on an extensive trip to major European film-importing countries. In the passport application that she filed in November 1922 (her first one), she listed her occupation as Export Manager of R-C Pictures Corporation, and declared her intentions to visit Czechoslovakia, England, Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark, and Germany. She sailed from New York on the S.S. Majestic on January 6, 1923, and returned from her European mission on June 2 ("Eight Liners" 14).

The press summarized the results of the junket: "Miss Edna Williams, foreign representative for the Film Booking Offices, returned last week on the Berengaria after a tour of six months over

Europe, during which time she established F.B.O. connections for the entire Continent and arranged to open branch offices in London, Paris and Berlin. It is understood that these connections are in no way to be exchanges of the F.B.O. or will in any way handle the physical distribution of their product, but will be branches of the home office for the purpose of acting as an outlet for F.B.O. films in those countries" ("F.B.O. to Have Offices" 1923, 562). Furthermore, additional branches were planned in Mexico, Cuba, and South America ("The Film Mart" 1923, 57).

In 1924, F.B.O. arranged a follow-up trip to Europe to finalize the new network. In September of that year, it was reported in *Moving Picture World* that:

> Edna Williams, foreign sales manager of F.B.O., was sent abroad by the organization early in May to survey conditions affecting the industry in the various foreign countries. After a short stay in London, she proceeded to the Continent where, after an extensive study of foreign film conditions, she realized that the time was ripe for opening permanent offices in the more important film centers.
>
> She made Paris her headquarters and at present is arranging for opening an office in that city, which will take care of F.B.O. sales in Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as in Asia Minor. After the completion of her work in France, Miss Williams plans to go to Berlin, where another office will be opened to take care of the entire Central European territory, including Russia, which is beginning to open up at this point.
>
> Miss Williams will also visit Rome, Vienna, Prague and Copenhagen before returning to the States. ("F.B.O. Active Abroad" 123)

Williams did relocate to Berlin, where she abided in the luxurious Hotel Adlon until returning on the S.S. Leviathan on April 27, 1925. Once again, in the summer of 1926, Williams returned to Germany on F.B.O. business ("Kann Returns" 1926, 38).

Inspecting the passenger manifests for these transatlantic trips, we see that Williams was traveling with Nella Clarke, who resided at the same home address (145 West 71st Street, New York). This was actually Williams' companion, former vaudeville star Nella Walker, sailing incognito. Her relationship to Walker had a significant impact on Williams' future career and her private life. According to her birth certificate, Walker was born Nellie Edna Walker to Charles Edwin Walker and Anna Savage Walker in Chicago, on March 6, 1886. She had been half of a successful vaudeville song-and-dance duo, Mack and Walker. She married Wilbur Mack, the stage name of George Feear Runyon, in 1911 ("Mack and Walker Wed" 10), but it was a turbulent relationship. In 1918, *Variety*—showing little respect for the couple's privacy—wrote that they "again separated." "They were due to leave to open in Duluth Thursday last," the story continued, "but Wednesday Miss Walker informed Mack she had decided not to accompany him. The couple has been married for some years but according to friends have led a rather stormy marital life, the final[e] coming with Miss Walker's refusal to go West" ("Mack and Walker Finale" 1).

We may speculate that Williams and Walker might have met through connections in the music business. Whatever the circumstances, they were identified as a couple in a brief *Variety* squib in July 1925: "Nella Walker (late of Mack and Walker) and Edna Williams of the O.B.U. Picture Company [*sic*] were also there [at a vaudeville show]" ("Germans Seek" 60). Perhaps this rather gratuitous gossip in the paper was innocent. Or perhaps it was an "outing." In any case, from this time or earlier, until the end of their lives, the two women were together.

In early 1926, Joseph P. Kennedy, the banker and stock player who had been advising Robertson-Cole and F.B.O., purchased the company. Thus, Williams again had a new boss. Kennedy had a reputation for ruthless downsizing and set about slashing the overhead and personnel at the California studio and the New York home office. We do not know how these actions directly affected Williams' relationship with the company. Nor do we know how open her same-sex partnership with Walker was, or what Kennedy's reaction to it might have been, had he known. But, by September 1926, she no longer worked for F.B.O. "After nine years association with the Company she founded," reported *Motion Picture News*, "Miss Williams resigns her post as foreign manager of Film Booking Offices of America. Her future plans will be ready for announcement shortly" ("Edna Williams Resigns As Foreign Manager" 1176).

The next phase of Williams' career began in October 1926: "Edna Williams, founder of original company out of which the existing F.B.O. organization has grown and for years head of its foreign department, has formed the Ednella Export Corp., which will engage in foreign distribution throughout the World. Miss Williams sails on the Berengaria on Oct. 13 to open offices in London, Paris and Berlin. Headquarters will be located in New York. Miss Williams' experience in export covers a period of 15 years" ("Ednella Corp. Formed" 4). The new corporation's name was a mashup of the partners' first names. Ednella was capitalized with 1,000 preferred shares at $100 each, and 3,000 common shares, no par. On October 5, the *New York Times* listed the officers as E. I. Williams and N.W. Clarke, presumably Walker's alias (44). (It is not known why Walker used "Clarke" as an alias; it was not her mother's maiden name, nor is there any record of a marriage after she left Wilbur Mack.)

The partners returned from their European trip on the Leviathan on November 29, 1926, and publicized their success in setting up branches on the Continent. According to *Film Daily,* the corporate office of Ednella was 1560 Broadway, above the Embassy Theater ("Edna Williams on Her Own" 14). Williams announced in the 1927 *Film Daily Yearbook*, "My faith in foreign markets during 1927 is best evidenced by the fact that I have just entered business under my own name" ("1927 Abroad" 921). An advertisement for Ednella Export Corporation a few pages later stated that, "Miss Williams takes this opportunity of thanking her many clients in the industry for their valued business in the past, and hopes to be favored with their patronage in this new enterprise" (926). On March 3, 1927, *Film Daily* reported that Ednella was taking over another exporter, Tower, and their foreign rights to the output of three small producers, including Bill Lumas' Gotham Productions (2). These dozen Gotham releases included, for example, the 1927 *Mountains of Manhattan*, which was directed by James P. Hogan and starred Dorothy Devore.

Despite the optimism behind Ednella Export, the company did not last even one year. We may speculate about numerous reasons for its demise. Obviously, the inability to secure consequential titles was significant. The introduction of sound in Hollywood in the late twenties would shock the international marketing of Hollywood talkies. And the major American distributors were using their economic and political prowess to consolidate their international distribution, squeezing out the low-budget independent productions of the sort that Ednella could acquire. Furthermore, the structure of international distribution was changing. As Williams had predicted, the market for world distribution had shifted from London to New York after the Great War. She could not have foreseen, however, how drastically the rise and consolidation of the major vertically-integrated producing corporations would fundamentally change distribution. As Ruth Vasey observed, Universal, Fox, Famous Players-Lasky, and Goldwyn "together managed to encircle virtually the entire globe with regional networks" (15). The old system of selling territorial rights outright that Williams inherited was giving way to a strategy that let producers retain more control, distributing product on a royalty basis ("American Picture Market" 1940, 64). The Ednella enterprise ended abruptly, but not so Williams' fascinating life story.

In the summer of 1929, Williams and Walker relocated from New York to Los Angeles, where the former vaudevillian aspired to become a movie actor. According to *Hollywood Filmograph*, "Nella Walker, that attractive and clever actress who is among the newcomers to Hollywood…is one of the few who come to Hollywood that pictures seek, for she had retired from the stage and has been spending much of her time abroad. But an old friend broadcast the news of her presence and picture offers followed. Now Miss Walker is delighted with her work, has taken a place in Hollywood and plans to remain" ("Nella Walker" 1930, 12). This is tantalizing. Was the "old friend" Edna Williams who put the word out that her partner was looking for work in the pictures? And was the person she spoke to Joseph P. Kennedy?

In October 1928, Kennedy's F.B.O. became part of a new conglomerate Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO), set up to make, distribute, and exhibit talking pictures ("Radio to Join Keith-Orpheum" 4). Kennedy was not actively involved with running the studio, but we might speculate that his word would have carried some weight. In any case, it was RKO Radio Pictures that gave Walker her first roles in the movies. She signed her Equity contract in August 1929, and was cast as a society matron in the comedy *Tanned Legs*, directed by Marshall Neilan, and released in November 1929 ("Some Cast" 1929, 20; Hodges 1929, 38). A string of RKO Radio Pictures followed rapidly: *Vagabond Lover* (Dir. Neilan, December 1929), *Seven Keys to Baldpate* (Dir. Reginald Barker, December 1929), and *Alias French Gertie* (Dir. George Archainbaud, April 1930), all featuring Walker as a player. In September 1930, she appeared in *What a Widow!*, a vehicle for Gloria Swanson produced by Kennedy, her lover. Walker went on to become a leading character actress. She appeared in over one hundred films, specializing in "mature" sophisticated roles, culminating in the Oscar-winning *Sabrina* (Dir. Billy Wilder, 1954).

Throughout Walker's long career, her constant companion, according to U.S. Census enumerations, was Williams. Walker was listed always as the head of the household, while Williams variously is noted as "guest," "lodger," or "boarder," reflecting the sexual mores of the

times. Williams died in Los Angeles of metastatic cancer on July 4, 1965, at the age of seventy-eight. Walker died on March 22, 1971. They are interred together in one crypt at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Los Angeles, California.

In 1940, when *Motion Picture Herald* compared the current state of global marketing to how it was in 1915, the author included Williams among the "conspicuous names" responsible for the expansion. Of the thirty-seven individuals, only a very few, such as Winfield Sheehan and Colvin W. Brown, are well-known to contemporary film historians ("American Picture Market" 64). Despite recent scholarship, clearly, much research on early cinema distribution remains to be done. Also significant, of the thirty-seven names on that roster of international film distribution pioneers, every one is male—except for Edna Williams.

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Citation

Crafton, Donald. "Edna Williams." In Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall’Asta, eds. *Women Film Pioneers Project*. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2018. <https://wfpp-test.cul.columbia.edu/pioneer/edna-williams/>